



# PSALM-VERSIONS AND FRENCH TUNES IN THE SCOTTISH PSALTER OF 1564

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## I

IN appreciation of the metrical renderings into English in the Genevan Psalter, some writers, and especially non-musical scholars, have perhaps not sufficiently realized that a considerable portion of the inequalities of verse-writing in the paraphrases of Whittingham, Kethe, Craig, and Pont is due to their struggles to fit English verses to the French tunes and intricate metres of French poets highly skilled in versification, whose psalm-versions were frequently fitted to special and highly elaborate secular airs. And though Calvin, in his preface to the Genevan Psalter of 1543, condemned the use of "light" tunes associated with lighter words, some of the French tunes retained in the Anglo-Genevan psalter certainly suggest a secular origin. It is interesting to find that the tune of Ps. 19 in Calvin's first psalter (1539),<sup>1</sup> which sounds extremely secular, has been dropped in the later French Psalter for a more serious tune in the same metre. So, though Sternhold and Hopkins have been aspersed for their slavish adherence to common English metres, a study of the more varied and enterprising versions of Whittingham, Kethe, Craig and Pont reveals that these were not original metres but adaptations of French ones. It also shows very plainly the difficulties of these paraphrasers between their sincere and pious desire to reproduce the exact sense of the Hebrew and at the same time to accommodate faithful translation to metres bristling with difficulties, of which the French feminine endings and sounded final "e's" were obviously the worst, though in addition there were irregular numbers and lengths of stanza lines and difficult rhyming patterns to follow. The consequence of this has been that the only three French psalm-tunes still familiar to our ears to-day (for the Old 113 and *Pater Noster* were German in origin) are the Old 100—the tune of Ps. 134 in the French Psalter, and, as reduced to Long Metre, not distinctively French at all—together with the altered short metre tune, now called "St. Michael," and the 124th ("Now Israel may say"), in which Whittingham was fortunate in not, for the nonce, being hampered by French feminine endings.

<sup>1</sup> See Sir Richard Terry's facsimile Reprint, 1932.

But with this glorious exception, Whittingham's psalms to French tunes and metres—viz., Ps. 50, 121, 129, and 130, are, frankly speaking, failures, as are (in practice) Kethe's 104 and Craig's 105—these being anapaestic measures which are quite out of joint when sung to their French tune, though they read well enough.

As Ps. 124 was Whittingham's best, so Ps. 129 is probably his worst amongst these attempts to wed French metres to British psalms, witness the lines :

“ Of Israel this may now be the song,  
Even from my youth my foes have oft me 'noyèd,  
A thousand ils [ills] since I was tender and young  
They have me wrought, yet was I not destroyèd,”

which have not even the advantage of singing easily to their tune. Whittingham's Ps. 50 was based on Beza's version, beginning :

“ Le Dieu, le Fort, l'Eternal parlera,  
Et haut et clair la terre appellera,”

which he thus renders :

“ The mighty God, th' Eternal hath thus spoke,  
And all the world he will call and provoke.”

But though he finds the necessary trochaic endings for some of his stanzas, the last two lines of his sixth verse—

“ God will appear in beauty most excellent,  
Our God will come before that long time be spent”—

should rather have run, to fit the tune, after this pattern :

“ God will appear in beauty high excelling,  
Our God ere long will fix in us his dwelling.”

One cannot help feeling that he might have tried a little harder. In Ps. 121, Whittingham models his first verse quite closely on Beza's original pattern (of secular suggestion), 8-6-6, 8-7-7,

“ Vers les monts jài levè mes yeux : ”

thus :

“ I lift mine eyes to Sion hill  
From whence I do attend  
That succour God me send.  
The mighty God me succour will  
Who heaven [hea-ven] and earth framèd  
And all things therein namèd.”

But in the second verse the last three lines hobble—

“ Lo, he that doth Israel confess  
No sleep at all can him catch,  
But his eyes shall ever watch.”

The tune was retained in the Scottish Psalter, but Whittingham's version

is included later in the English Psalter, without any tune being assigned to it !

Whittingham's Ps. 130 (numbered 129 in the French Psalter, following the Vulgate) was written to a French tune in the metre of "Jerusalem the Golden." This French *De Profundis* sings very sweetly and easily to its tune, but in Whittingham's translation, though the number of syllables is the same as the French in each line, the accents are all wrong for the first and third, which follow a different pattern, viz., 76-76, like this—

"Good King Wenceslas went out  
Upon Saint Stephen's Eve."

Only in the first half of his last stanza does Whittingham even catch at the rhythm of his copy—

"Let Israel then boldly  
In the Lord put his trust,  
He is that God of mercie  
That him delyver must."

The tune in its French (1539) and Scottish (1564) forms clearly shows how melody and rhythm have been discomposed in the Scottish version. Even allowing for the greater poetic licence of the time, the above versions are bad and awkward.

The tune of Whittingham's Ps. 51 (French Psalter, No. 50), *Miserere mei*, is stated by Dr. Fulton to be French, but I cannot find any evidence of this.<sup>1</sup> It is not in Livingston's list of French tunes in the Anglo-Genevan Psalter, and Ravenscroft classes it as English. It is the "Sweet Tune" of Barton's Psalms, 1644. But give Whittingham an English tune and an English metre to fit it, and instead of breaking his teeth on the French metrical forms, how well he can use long, short, or common measure, as in his spirited Ps. 114, either as sung to its proper tune in the Scottish Psalter or to the tune we now know as the Old 44th. Take again his 119th, set to the tune later called by Barton "Old England"; or his anapaestic version of Ps. 67, like Kethe's 104 an early example of the stanza of "Though troubles assail," which fits quite well to its cheerful tune, almost certainly an English one, in the rhythm of "Duke St." with an extra syllable to start the line—a version of much more character than Hopkins's, even if more diffuse, as Livingston remarked of it.

As a last example, Whittingham's Ps. 23, the original basis of the version we sing to-day, is happily companioned with the beautiful and serene tune long ago forgotten, but perhaps discarded because Whittingham's version was in successive revisions condensed into five 4-line stanzas

<sup>1</sup> In Calvin's First Psalter, 1539, both tune and metre are quite different from Whittingham's in the Sc. Psalter.

instead of three of 8 lines. In the English Psalter Whittingham's 23rd is referred to the tune of Ps. 18, but the Scottish Psalter adhered to the Genevan setting "to be sung as Ps. 3," and this D.C.M. tune was probably the first to which it was ever sung. Already in the Scottish Psalter of 1595 it has been divided into 4-line verses and set to a new C.M. tune.

## II

Further examples of the more or less unhappy results of adherence to French tunes are seen in Kethe's 62nd in 11-11, 10-11, 11-10, metre (set to Ps. 103 in Calvin's First Psalter of 1539 as "*Sus louez Dieu, mon âme en toute chose*") in which he occasionally abandons rhyme altogether, and accents "vanity" and "gravity" thus—"van-itty," "grav-itty." His bravest attempt is his Ps. 126—two long verses in the metre 12-12, 12-12, 10-10. But his 142nd, though difficult to scan at first sight, keeps better to his pattern and his tune. In the case of Pont's 81 and 83, the former is set to the French Ps. 33—which has the appearance of a secular tune—and Pont's verses are about as awkward as possible. The same remark applies to his 83rd, to the tune of Ps. 10 in the French Psalter. These two versions are substituted in the English Psalter by Hopkins, who does much better—though more easily—in Common Metre with a triple-time tune (a rarity in the Anglo-Genevan Psalter) which seems to be English. But Pont's Ps. 80, an anapaestic version beginning

"O Pastor of Israel, like sheep that dost lead

The linage of Joseph, advert and take heed,"

set to a tune Livingston thought to be of Scottish origin, from its character, is a fine version, untrammelled by a difficult tune. This Ps. 80 tune which Livingston failed to trace elsewhere I recently discovered in the Swedish *Piæ Cantiones*, 1582,<sup>1</sup> to the hymn *Jesus Christus, nostra salus*. But whatever its country of origin may have been, it must by 1564 have been long enough sung by Scottish folk to acquire a Scottish character (including a gapped scale) and to have "grown to" a different metre from that of the Latin hymn. The Scottish form bears considerable likeness to a folk-air widely known in Britain, "My true love once he courted me." (The curious history of the transformations of this tune cannot be entered upon here. One of these adaptations is found in the Revised Hymnary.)

The most successful of all with the French tunes and metres, in my opinion, was Kethe, despite the fact that he is not credited with a musical

<sup>1</sup> For references to the earliest form of this tune, A.D. 1410, and later versions, see Woodward's edition of the *Piæ Cantiones*, 1910.

reputation like Whittingham's. Livingston considered that Kethe took the highest place in "variety, fidelity, energy, and elegance," and called his Ps. 100 the gem of the whole collection. Of his twenty-five versions, against Whittingham's sixteen, no fewer than about eighteen were set to French tunes. The most interesting, both from a literary and musical point of view, are his Ps. 107, 111, 122, 125, 138, and 142, though he was tackling the metres 6-6-8, 6-6-8—double (in imitation of French 6-6-7, 6-6-7—double) in Ps. 122; 8-8-8-8, 6-6 in Ps. 125; 10-11, 10-11, 11-11 in Ps. 138; and 9-8, 9-9, 8-6 in Ps. 142 (which sings better than it reads). Other tunes, including Ps. 107, were more easily adapted to English metres, though Kethe's Ps. 47 is out of joint with the twelve short lines of the French tune, and in Ps. 62 he has sometimes to forgo rhymes altogether in keeping to the trochaic endings of the French.

But enough has been said to explain in great measure the varying quality of Whittingham's versions, and those of Kethe, Craig, and Pont.

### III

If we turn to tunes in the Anglo-German Psalter which have never been traced either to French or German sources (though Havergal was inclined to think some of them were founded on the Gregorian modes), there are a number of phrases, like the first line of the Old 100, which have helped to make up a good many tunes that were in use. It does not seem possible to assign any positively or directly to British composers, though probably a number were composed either in England or by English exiles in Geneva, as Calvin, it is believed, sought the help both of English and Continental musicians for "weighty and serious" tunes suitable for the psalms. But there are in many of these psalm-tunes melodic turns of speech, if one may so put it, which recall English secular tunes of the Tudor period, such as "Fortune, my foe" (to which there is a new song ["Welcum, Fortoun"] in the *Gude and Godlie Ballatis*—ed. of 1567), the old "Chevy Chase" tune, and certain old carols, including "God rest you merry, gentlemen." Livingston recognised Scottish characteristics in others. And in the case of certain tunes retained only in the Scottish Psalter he suggests that the Scots may have clung to them because they were of Scottish origin and long current in Scotland. The lyric character of some of the British tunes may also have been disguised by their being turned from triple into common time, for example the first half of Ps. 18 is very like the "Coventry Carol," and "London" was originally in triple time, like "Lamentation"—which first appears in the English Psalter, to Ps. 59, and is probably English.

In the most recent hymnaries, Presbyterian and others, the attempt has been made to revive some of the old French psalm-tunes, either to their own psalms or to modern hymns. The Rev. Nichol Grieve, B.D., of Liverpool, has set to several of them English versions which really fit them, and Mrs. K. W. Simpson also has skilfully translated the nineteen Psalms, Song of Simeon, and Ten Commandments of Calvin's First Psalter (1539) into English versions which both read and sing well. It should not be forgotten, too, that a Wedderburn—probably John—as long ago as the date of the "*Gude and Godlie Ballatis*," translated, in the same metre, the French metrical version of the Ten Commandments, "*Oyons la Loy que de sa voix*," but substituting "O God be mercyfull to us" for the *Kyrie eleison* following each Commandment. This in all probability was sung to the French tune of 1539.

